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ABSTRACT

Metaphoric analysis of family systems theory illustrates how metaphors and alternatives to those metaphors identify what a psychological theory has highlighted and obscured about the phenomena at its focus and how it has structured that phenomena. The most commonly used metaphors in family systems theory are the metaphors of system (system elements, patterned relationships among elements, system goals), entity (external boundaries, system cohesion), internal structure (internal system boundaries), system vitality (energy), and governance (system rules negative feedback, homeostasis, fit to the environment, morphogenesis, positive feedback). Although a system for choosing theoretical metaphors has yet to be developed, alternative metaphors should not stray too far from the original metaphors and must be concrete. Examples of three fresh family systems metaphors include the family as a group of people traveling in a vehicle, the family as a tapestry, and the family as a river. Each provides a different degree of emphasis and insight into understanding families. (KEH)

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Analysis of Theoretical Metaphors with Illustrations from Family Systems Theory

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Abstract

Psychological theories contain metaphors. Exploring the metaphors of a theory and the alternatives to those metaphors helps to identify what a theory has been highlighting and obscuring about the phenomena at its focus and how it has structured the phenomena. To illustrate the process and the possible gains of metaphoric analysis, this paper explores the metaphors of family systems theory. Factors useful in carrying out the metaphoric analysis of a theory and the generation of alternative metaphors are discussed. Three novel metaphors for family systems are presented, each of which seems to provide fresh understanding of family dynamics.

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Analysis of Theoretical Metaphors with Illustrations from Family Systems Theory

A metaphor uses a word or phrase denoting one kind of object or idea in place of another, suggesting a likeness or analogy between them. All of language is laden with metaphor, and all psychological theories use metaphors. Cognitive theories use metaphors from computer science, electronics, library systems and the like. Social psychological theories build on metaphors from drama, causal analysis, economics, scientific research, and so on.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have written one of the most frequently cited of the large number of recent works on metaphor. They argue that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not only in language but in thought and action (p. 3). In fact, they assert that thought processes are largely metaphorical. From the Lakoff and Johnson perspective, once we think in term of a metaphor, its entailments stimulate and direct our thinking in a coherent and systematic way, making entailed associations, connections, and creative leaps likely if not certain and making non-entailed associations, connections, and creative leaps difficult or impossible. Lakoff and Johnson say that we are captured by our metaphors. It becomes hard to step back from them and to see alternative realities because they become our reality. As a metaphor creates a reality, it structures, highlights, and obscures, organizing phenomena for us and focusing attention at the risk of missing other things that might be useful or even invaluable to believe or see. The computer metaphor in cognitive theories, for example, highlights the guiding systems which may be used in processing information and the importance of understanding how information is stored and retrieved, but it obscures intuitive processes, the ways in which input is multiple, chaotic, fluid or out of control, and the instability and multiple transformations of what is stored. Similarly, the computer metaphor in cognitive psychology indicates linkages, causal relationships, hierarchy, differences in degree of importance of various cognitive mechanisms, and the mechanisms themselves. Thus, the computer model gives us notions of discrete operations in thought, hierarchical organization to processing and information storage, operational sequences like those engaged in by computers, and a sense of what sequences there are to processes and what can go wrong. With a different structural metaphor, for example that of a lending library or a town meeting, we would come to different structures and systems of thought.

There is, as Lakoff and Johnson claim, a cultural context to metaphoric process. That means first of all that metaphors are culturally and linguistically situated, so people from different cultures and people speaking different languages will come to different metaphors and presumably to different theories and realities. It also means that, "the most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental concepts of the culture" (p. 22). In other words, you know something about our values by knowing our

favorite metaphors, and vice versa. They suggest, however, that there are metaphoric process that may be pan-human. One is the use of metaphors of entity and substance to categorize and delimit (ch. 6). For example, we make feelings into things with labels and quantify them. Other metaphoric processes that may be pan-human are that we typically conceptualize the nonphysical in terms of the physical and the less clearly delineated in terms of the more clearly delineated (ch. 12), with our most primary physical experiences including our location in space (up-down, front-back, near-far, in-out) and the terms of which our bodies function (warm-cold, light-dark, female-male).

Exploring what a theoretical metaphor highlights and obscures and the structure it provides helps to identify perspectives and aspects of the focal phenomena that have been missed by a theory. As an illustration of the process and of possible gains from metaphoric analysis and the exploration of alternative metaphors, consider family systems theory. It provides the root metaphors for family therapy, is codified in family field handbooks and textbooks, and is extended, reinvented, and reillustrated in every issue of family therapy journals like Family Process and the Journal of Marriage and Family Therapy.

It may seem an act of imperialism to claim family systems theory for psychology when other disciplines use it, write about it, teach it, and claim it as theirs. Family systems theory is an important conceptual system in clinical social work, family psychiatry, family medicine, home economics, family sociology, nursing, and a family field that is a discipline in its own right. But the fact that other disciplines claim a psychological theory makes it no less a psychological theory. Versions of the theory rely heavily on the analysis of personality dynamics, the social psychology of close relations, cognitive processes, the psychology of communication, and much else that many professionals and scholars in psychology understand to be within psychology.

The Metaphors of Family Systems Theory

There are versions of family systems theory based on metaphors from psychoanalysis, from the field of communication, and from the sociology of roles, but the most commonly used metaphors seem to me to derive from language used to talk about organisms, social systems, machines, or systems in general. Thus, I believe the most commonly used metaphors in family systems theory are the metaphors of system (e.g., system elements, patterned relationships among elements, system goals), entity (e.g., external boundaries, system cohesion), internal structure (e.g., internal system boundaries), system vitality (e.g., energy), and governance (e.g., system rules, negative feedback, homeostasis, fit to the environment, morphogenesis, positive feedback).

Each family system metaphor provides a structure to family phenomena and highlights some aspects of families while obscuring others. The metaphor of family system itself leads us to see and study regularity, pattern, recurrence, and connection, while leading us away from randomness and the way in which individuals

are often embedded in many separate families, some of which may not even be linked in any other way than through the individual. The family system metaphor obscures the importance of once-in-a-lifetime events and the uniqueness and nonreplicability of events that superficially seem identical or similar.

The metaphors of entitativity (cf. Campbell, 1958) that are applied to families highlight the extent to which family members interact more with each other than with anyone else, the extent to which they are similar, have a common fate, identify with the family, are understood by others to be a separate organizational entity, and are treated as a corporate unit in the legal system. However, entitativity metaphors such as the metaphor of external boundaries obscure how each member of the family actually exists in a separate family from every other member. A married woman with children, for example, is related to her parents and siblings in ways that her husband and children are not. Do her parents and siblings belong inside the family boundaries that circumscribe her husband and children? And if they do, what about the husband of her sister, or her mother's sister? The concept of external boundaries also obscures the extent to which a family member's connections with God, friends, neighbors, co-workers, or even somebody who is not alive might be the most important connections of all for the person. The concept of external boundaries also obscures the extent to which the family is a collection of individuals who may compete intensely for resources, who may have extremely different values, and who may experience the family and everything else quite differently from anyone else in the family.

A Clue to the Limits of Any Psychological Theory

One route to recognizing the limitations of the metaphors of any psychological theory is to acknowledge that a theory will have been directed to one or a few of the many goals there could be for it. Family systems theory has been used primarily for intervention. Much of the creative work, much of the work of editorial gatekeepers, and much of what there is for students to learn about family systems theory is directed toward helping troubled families to change. That suggests one source of obscuring--the theory may miss what is not useful in intervention. With alternative goals such as improving people's understanding of their own families, documenting the continuity of families, promoting an appreciation of the aesthetics of family operation, showing how living in a family is a continuing adventure, or showing how family life is detrimental to human health, creativity, and survival, fresh metaphors for family systems come to mind.

Problems in Finding New Metaphors

An issue in finding alternative metaphors is that if one strays too far from the original metaphors of a theory the new metaphors may lead to a domain that is alien to the theory. At some point the question must be asked, "When is an alternative version of theory X no longer a version of theory X?" Family systems theory deals with organization, system, and pattern in families. Must new metaphors of family systems also apply to family organization, system, and pattern, lest the theory no

longer be a family systems theory? If so, one constraint on the development of alternative metaphors is that they must be at least somewhat congruent with the metaphors they replace. But how do we determine that congruence? And how do we determine it independently from the metaphors we have been using and are now considering applying? Does a requirement of partial congruence block us from escaping to totally new and productive realities? What if we abandon metaphors of cognitive process entirely and say that our new metaphors for dealing with learning, memory, and thinking will come from models of the internal dynamics of stars or of Brownian movement?

Another issue in finding alternative metaphors is the degree of concreteness of the metaphor. Psychological theories usually work at a high level of abstraction. Some reasons for that may lie in the sociology of the discipline, but it also has something to do with the range of applications available from a more abstract theory. Concrete metaphors are, however, of great power, particularly when the concreteness enables application of metaphors drawn from areas rich in people's experiences. Concrete, familiar metaphors give the theoretician more details to manipulate. They may lead to metaphoric absurdities, but they also may help to identify important nuances.

A system for choosing theoretical metaphors has yet to be developed. At present the process of choosing metaphors may at best be one of random variation and selective survival. However, my current approach to metaphoric analysis is to take one piece of the metaphor, phenomenon, or reality of interest, hold it constant, and try to find new metaphors in which to embed it. For example, I can take as my starting place for finding new family system metaphors the existence of discrete but related elements. If I try to produce insights with, say, the goal of helping people to think about their own family life, there seem to be many possibilities. Here are three: the family as a group of people traveling in a vehicle, the family as a tapestry, and the family as a river.

Three Fresh Metaphors

Thinking of the family as a group of people traveling in a vehicle seems to me to highlight issues of shared vs. individual control and of the extent to which control by one person may effect the safety of others. I think it highlights the extent to which a family may navigate legally or not by the standards of others, the extent to which it is traveling a laid out course, the extent to which only certain courses may be traveled, the extent to which it may travel the same course repeatedly, and the extent to which it may travel with a map or wander aimlessly and lost. We can talk about fueling up or running out of gas, about breakdown and the need for repairs, about getting on each other's nerves because of being confined together for a long trip.

Thinking of the family as a tapestry emphasizes how differences are necessary for the whole, how a warp and woof at right angles to each other is necessary for the whole, how the underside of family life may be very different from the aesthetically attractive display side (Rosenblatt & Wright, 1984), how there may be an aesthetic unity to the whole, and how

any one element of the whole contributes but is not necessarily crucial to the whole. We can talk about the quality of the tapestry and its elements--durability, for example--or of its attractiveness to others. We can talk about how it fits its environment and about the need to replace a crucial element that is removed.

Thinking of the family as a river emphasizes the long term continuity of the family, the flow of it within bounds, the possibility of drying up without fresh input, the basic homogeneity and unity of the family, the flow of the family toward some distant joining with other families, and the way the family can nourish, be irrelevant to, or destroy its surroundings.

To appreciate each of these metaphors fully would require an extended discussion, with an attempt to see how much the metaphor actually leads us to see, recognize, or believe new things about some family or families in general. I have little idea of how to compare any of these metaphors with standard metaphors in the literature, particularly when the new metaphors have been generated with different goals than the standard ones. My guess is that metaphors are like tools. They are good for some things and useless for others. The river metaphor may be just the right tool to open doors and unlock mysteries for one individual or family, but be worse than useless for others.

Conclusion

Metaphoric analysis can be rejuvenating, reawakening, and priority reviewing--like housecleaning, cleaning out and rearranging file drawers, thumbing through old journals, moving the living room furniture, or repotting a plant. It could lead to discarding what is no longer useful, discovering what should have been obvious but was not, awakening to possibilities not recognized before, and a surge of healthy growth. However, there are many unsolved problems in coming to new metaphors. Among them are the following. How do we decide which metaphors are relevant? How do we decide which metaphors will be more fruitful and which will not be? How do we judge whether a metaphor has brought us new insights? How do we decide which entailments of a metaphor to use and which to ignore? What do we do with the possibility that a metaphor means different things to different people? How do we even catch on to that?

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